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Joshua Lund. The Mestizo State: Reading Race in Modern Mexico. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012. xx + 217 pp.

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Abstract

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Keywords

Mexican literature, mestizaje, race, national identity

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This book offers an excellent study of how the notions of *mestizaje* (understood as the mixing of indigenous and white bloods) have changed in Mexico from the second half of the nineteenth century to the 1960s, in the country's desire to organize and define itself as a nation (including the effects of the Mexican Revolution in its quest for a common hegemony to the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*). To achieve this goal, Lund structures his study in four chapters, the first two dealing with male authors during the *Porfiriato* (the period marked by the rule of Porfirio Díaz as president of Mexico, 1876-1910), and the second two with female authors during the 1960s.

The first chapter examines the editorials by Luis Alva, a now almost forgotten Mexican columnist during the *Porfiriato*, and his framing of the Indian problem within the terms of production, clearly marking the race/space relationship that, for Lund, is the cornerstone of the Indian problem for the Mexican intelligentsia in the nineteenth century. Although there were legal and social ramifications, the solution to the Indian problem was primarily economic in nature. Lund introduces in this chapter his notion of *Indianization*, a neologism to describe "the promotion of the idea that the indigenous communities represented not an irritating margin but rather the very center of Mexican national identity" (5). For Alva, the indigenous Mexican was not a symbol or monument to be shown, but a real historical actor in the process of nation building if only because of his capability for violence, and in his view, the notion of "mejorar la raza" 'improving the race' was not to whiten the Indian, but to *indianize* the white man (17).

The second chapter analyzes Ignacio Altamirano's *El Zarco* (1888), paying equal attention to both the author himself and the novel. Being as he was a mixed-blood or *mestizo* intellectual with plenty to gain and lose in the race game in nineteenth century Mexico, the figure of Altamirano became for Lund "the exemplary protagonist of the mestizo state: the de-Indianized Indian or the mestizo subject" (39).

In what may be a problematic jump in time and gender, the third chapter moves to Rosario Castellanos's *Oficio de tinieblas* (1962), studying this novel in the context of Castellanos's own work for the INI (Indigenous National Institute), her own social and racial class, and some theoretical notions on race itself: Michael Foucault's "race war," Franz Boas's articulation of "race and culture" and his disciple Manuel Gamio's "race and nation." The three approaches share a common view: the indigenous inferiority complex is contextual, not inherent, so changing the context should lead to solving the problem. For Lund, Castellanos

was the Mexican writer who more explicitly captured “these complexities in the Mexican race-nation dynamic” (97).

Last, but not least, the fourth chapter reads Elena Garro’s *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963) as a critique of Ernest Renan’s “What is a Nation?” (1882). Lund reflects on how silence in the Indian characters brings attention to the marginalization of indigenous Mexicans and questions the politics of race in the country during the 1960s. It is what he calls “a clearly visible invisibility” (118). Lund skillfully articulates how Renan’s construction of the nation is, de facto, a discourse about race, to adapt those notions to the Mexican reality.

This work will be extremely useful to scholars interested in Mexican literature and also in race relations and race construction. The first chapter on Luis Alva is particularly interesting for bringing to light this obscure writer who had ideas that were probably more advanced than those of better known intellectuals such as José Vasconcelos (and his “cosmic race”). However, the book has two potential problems: the first one, the lack of discussion on gender when it is obvious that there is not only a time difference between the contents of the first two chapters and those of the second two (end of the nineteenth century versus mid-twentieth century), but a gender difference: the first two authors discussed are male, whereas the second two are female. Although sometimes there are hints in that direction, this issue is never explicitly addressed. One can only wonder how authorial gender can have an impact on the perception of racial issues. The second issue is the lack of conclusion: some readers may consider the end of the book abrupt, since there is no “conclusion” or any ending chapter. All in all, though, Lund’s book studies a relevant issue in Mexican, and by extension Latin American letters and culture, and he offers an interesting perspective by articulating race and space. The extensive endnotes are quite helpful as well. It is highly recommended to any scholars or libraries interested in race and literature in Mexico.

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